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INSIDE WASHINGTON



BY NILES LATHEM

A war inside the Pentagon

A CHAOTIC and Byzantine power struggle is raging inside the Pentagon and the CIA over control of one of the most sensitive positions in the entire U.S. government.

The job is not exactly a household word. It's called the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy — a position with a deliberately discreet title.

But the job is far more serious than its title may suggest.

Among its responsibilities are "emergency planning," which means preparing a list of targets in the event of a nuclear war, deciding who lives and who dies if the U.S. ever is attacked by nuclear weapons and insuring the "continuity of government" in case of nuclear war.

If this wasn't enough of a responsibility, the Deputy Under Secretary for Policy has control of the Defense Investigative Service, control of a great deal of space satellite intelligence operations as well as the Office of Security Plans and Programs, which is in charge of protecting U.S. military installations from terrorists.

Also in the Deputy Under Secretary's office is an agency known as the Special Advisory Group — which sources say is the liaison with the CIA for covert operations.

The intrigue began earlier this year when the current titleholder, Gen. Richard Stillwell, announced his retirement and control over this highly sensitive office got bogged down in ordinary, everyday politics.

Immediately, two candidates emerged to replace Stillwell.

The first and leading contender, until recently, was Stillwell's deputy

Ronald H. Stivers, 53, who had Stillwell's support as well as the enthusiastic backing of conservative senators and the White House personnel office.

His opponent is Dov Zakheim, 40, a Pentagon budgetary and Mideast expert, who quickly lined up some powerful support of his own in the defense establishment, including most of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's top civilian lieutenants and influential Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.).

The competition has been stalemated for the past three months — neither side can overcome the other's opposition to their candidate.

Then earlier last month, Under Secretary of Defense Fred Ikle, who technically oversees the office, decided to break the stalemate by promoting Stivers to the post of Special Advisor for Nuclear Employment Policy — a job which no one in the Pentagon has ever heard of.

The move infuriated the proud and loyal Gen. Stillwell so much that he refused to leave his office — even though his retirement date was effective last December.

Stivers also is hanging tough and refuses to leave his office, despite the "promotion," according to Pentagon insiders.

Last week, CIA Director William Casey took matters into his own hands.

Pentagon sources said a 34-year-old lawyer from Yale, who held a junior GS-14 bureaucratic rank at the CIA, arrived unexpectedly at a staff meeting in Stillwell's office and announced that he was the new liaison for covert operations.

Rumors quickly spread from the Pentagon to the White House that the lawyer, Phillip Kunsberg, was actually taking over for Stillwell — prompting a rather bizarre inquiry from the White House Office of Personnel.

"Did Kunsberg ever do any work for the Reagan campaign?" the White House asked.

Since no one had heard of Kunsberg before, the query remained unanswered.

Meanwhile, as Kunsberg moved in, Stillwell and Stivers were still refusing to leave; White House and Pentagon lawyers were studying the legality of a CIA bureaucrat moving in on the Pentagon; and senators on the Hill were burning the telephone lines with angry complaints about what occurred last week.

"You get a rather interesting response when you call down to that office and ask who's in charge. It's kind of like the comedy routine, 'Who's on First?'" remarked a senior Pentagon official.

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THE STATE Dept. is under fire after a series of investigations which revealed that the U.S. Embassy in Moscow is being penetrated by the Soviet KGB.

Red-faced administration officials admitted last week that the KGB for at least four years was able to read every classified embassy document after planting listening devices in embassy typewriters.

But senior U.S. intelligence officials say that the typewriter episode is not the only way the KGB could be penetrating the embassy.

Members of the Presidential Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board reportedly are outraged after they discovered that the State Dept. allows between 100 and 130 Soviet nationals to work in the embassy.